

Building Stakeholder Support: Academics and the Arts

Leaders set priorities. With multiple demands on the limited quantities of school resources and classroom time, one of the most essential jobs facing every school leader is the allocation of those finite resources in a way that will have the maximum effect on student success. For some schools, the imperative to raise test scores may lead administrators to sacrifice seemingly nonrelated subjects such as music and art in order to provide the time and resources necessary for success in literacy and math.

The debate is particularly contentious, even by the standards of acrimony in educational debates. Proponents of the trade-off note that if students lack essential literacy skills, then no amount of music or art will gain them economic opportunity and self-sufficiency. To do otherwise, they argue, would deny basic opportunities to underperforming students who frequently are poor and members of ethnic minorities. Social justice, they conclude, demands more time on academic subjects. Proponents of the arts claim with equal vigor that an educational system that provides the beauty, engagement, and enjoyment of the arts to the rich but not to the poor is profoundly unjust. When students

who arrive at school with sound reading skills are afforded a rich and varied curriculum but students without those advantages are consigned to endless reading and math drills, then we have only resegregated classrooms and schools on racial and economic lines.

A False Dichotomy

Both sides make a compelling case. But the evidence suggests that the stark choice between academic skills and the arts presents a false dichotomy. Time in school need not be a “zero-sum game” in which every moment dedicated to music and art represents a minute sacrificed from literacy and math. Great classes in the fine arts not only provide rich stimulation for students but also are directly related to improvements in academic success.

Let us first consider one thing on which educators in every field can agree: when students are far behind in literacy and math skills, summer school and after-school programs are not enough. Students need more time during every regular school day, particularly for the development of literacy skills (Reeves, 2004a). The longer we wait to intervene effectively to meet student literacy needs, the worse the conditions become. An 8th grade student who is not reading on grade level has an 85 percent likelihood of remaining behind grade level in reading throughout all of high school (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001). Therefore, both sides of the argument should at least agree that literacy is essential and that the sooner disadvantaged students catch up with their more advantaged peers, the better for the students and society. The opportunity for lifelong enjoyment of the arts is, at least to some degree, dependent upon the opportunity to escape a life of poverty and unemployment.

But what about evidence that the arts support literacy and math skills? Many teachers have anecdotal evidence about the development of math skills in a music class or the reinforcement of a rich and varied vocabulary through the use of vivid visual images in an art class. Petersen (2007) reviewed the progress of Thompson Elementary School in Aldine, Texas; Feaster-Edison Charter School, a K–6 school in Chula Vista, California; and the Elm City College Preparatory School, a K–8 school in New Haven, Connecticut. All of these schools had substantial numbers of students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and every student population included significant percentages of ethnic and linguistic minority students. Nevertheless, Petersen found that “these schools have all managed to achieve impressive results by using data on student performance in subjects like reading, math, and science, and yet all still manage to deliver a well-rounded curriculum that includes art, music, and physical education” (p. 42).

These examples are not isolated. Indeed, the 1999 Indiana Teacher of the Year, Larry Hurt, is an art teacher who makes extensive use of nonfiction writing in his classes. Jan Bowler is a music teacher in Massachusetts who regularly requires students to produce written reflections on their practices and performances. Both educators reflect the conviction of pediatrician Mel Levine (2002) that writing is “the largest orchestra a kid will ever conduct.”

Other recent evidence suggests a direct and systematic link between art experiences and literacy performance. Kennedy (2006) described a recent study from the Guggenheim Museum that compared students who participated in the museum’s art project with those who did not. “The study found that students in the program performed better in six categories of literacy and critical thinking skills—including thorough description, hypothesizing, and reasoning—than did students who were not in the program” (p. 1). Teachers all over the world can

benefit from partnerships with museums through www.EchoSpace.org, a site that links teachers to projects such as the Alaska Native Heritage Center, the Peabody-Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, the Bishop Museum in Hawaii, and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, to name just a few.

One of the most remarkable examples of effective integration of the arts into an academic curriculum comes from veteran teacher Maureen Copeland, who teaches Advanced Placement (AP) European History at Fort Myers High School in Lee County, Florida. Working with ethnically and economically diverse students, most of whom are sophomores rather than the seniors who traditionally take AP classes, Ms. Copeland routinely produces classes in which more than 80 percent pass the AP test and more than 30 percent achieve the maximum score of 5. The students are challenging, including many who need basic work in reading, writing, document analysis, and academic focus. The secret of her success? “Art is a hook,” Ms. Copeland says. “I’ll use Goya and David to show two perspectives on war, and 18th century Dutch paintings that reflect the relationship between colonialism and global trade.” Tellingly, she adds, “The kids love it.” The AP European History curriculum is notoriously dense, with far more to cover than is rational for a single-period, one-year class. How does Ms. Copeland find the time to cover such an intense curriculum and also to nurture a love of art among her students? “If it’s important, you make the time,” she explains. Her experience suggests that art is not an “extra” that can be indulged in when time permits, but rather an essential ingredient of superior academic instruction.

Despite abundant evidence on the association between the arts and student academic performance, critics are quick to note that there are many confounding variables at work—most particularly the socioeconomic status of the student. It is possible that students with extensive exposure to art and music have higher test scores not because

of the art and music, but rather because those students are more likely to come from affluent families. Therefore, it is particularly important to note that the research cited in this chapter specifically refers to the value of music and art in schools where students are struggling academically and where they also experience disadvantages related to low income.

Strategies to Consider

Whatever the future of current federal laws, such as No Child Left Behind, the vast majority of schools will continue to regard annual test scores as an important measure of student progress, and educational leaders will ignore them at their peril. Moreover, opportunities for students continue to be related to test scores. The challenge before leaders is to preserve the beauty that the arts offer to every student without sacrificing the educational opportunities students need. Here are three strategies to consider.

First, call a truce. Educators of every subject are, first and foremost, teachers of children, not teachers of one particular discipline. We expect every teacher to teach honesty, self-discipline, and organization, and it is similarly reasonable to expect all teachers to regard literacy not as a diversion from their primary subject but as a useful way of helping students to think about their subject. We do not write in music and art class because music and art are unimportant, but rather because those subjects are so important they are worth thinking about. Writing is not merely a mechanical skill but a reflection of students' reasoning and thinking. Establish a norm that there is no such thing as a "nonacademic" class in school and that every subject is worthy of the thought and discipline that we associate with academic study.

Second, make it a two-way street. Although it is increasingly common to expect music and art teachers to integrate literacy into their lessons, wise teachers of history, English, science, and math know that music, art, and dance can form powerful visual, auditory, and kinesthetic associations that help students learn essential content and concepts.

Third, treat students as if they were rich. Imagine for a moment that you are the headmaster of an elite private school. Some students are behind in reading and math, yet you are committed to providing a solid arts education for every student. After all, parents who are paying \$20,000 to \$30,000 in annual tuition payments expect you to both provide necessary academic interventions and also deliver a rich and engaging arts curriculum. What would you do? Perhaps you would provide extra literacy instruction for all students, from those who are struggling to those who are advanced. You certainly would ensure that every student received opportunities to excel not only academically but also in the arts, technology, and athletics.

As leaders reflect on their challenging role in balancing the arts, academic requirements, and every other demand for resources and time, we should consider the provocative question: "What would we do if our students were rich?" Then we should ask, "Is there any public school student who deserves any less?"